

Using dialogue to reduce the turbulence: focussing on building social capital to encourage more sustainable PR goals and outcomes

Abstract

Today's 'turbulent times' can be blamed on a lack of social capital. In the UK, the chair of the Financial Services Authority (FSA) believes that the financial sector 'has swollen beyond its socially useful size...I think some of it is socially useless activity' (Turner, 2009:1). And leading economist, Will Hutton (2009), blames the financial turbulence on the 'intellectual and moral failure' not just of financial institutions – but also of legislators, regulators, business leaders and academics basing their ideas on a 'narrow ideological theory and consumer culture' with a business mantra deemed 'a short termist philosophy and amoral way of doing capitalism'. A number of key thinkers have noted an erosion of social capital in contemporary cultures – notably, Putnam (1993, 1996, 2000) in the United States. And in the UK the ideas inherent in the theory of social capital – building trust and connections between individuals and social networks – clearly resonate with David Cameron's rhetoric in relation to 'Broken Britain' and his ambitions for a 'Big Society'.

At an organizational level, social capital can refer to the impact that organizations can have on sustaining cohesive societies (through employment creation, community relations and corporate social responsibility activities and so on) , but also in a more commercially strategic sense, it refers to the *value* accrued by an organization being deemed a trustworthy, productive actor in society and part of a network: 'the type of connections that an organisation has with competitors, politicians, journalists, bureaucrats, researchers and other relevant groups' (Ihlen 2009). Thus, public relations practice can be conceptualised as a means of building social capital through communication with a range of stakeholders.

In recognition of the difficulties (both practical and ethical) of managing stakeholders (or even relationships) the concept of stakeholder *management* is being increasingly replaced by the notion of stakeholder *engagement* premised on a dialogical approach (de Bussey 2010, Heath 2007) although the ability to achieve real engagement is highly contested. A body of knowledge points to dialogue theory and dialogic and deliberative approaches (see Anderson et al. 2004, Deetz and Simpson, 2004, Kapein and van Tulder 2003) as being the best way to achieve engagement, and views are emerging which point to the importance of this approach to public relations (Kent and Taylor 2002, Heath et al . 2006, Dials and Shirka 2008, de Bussy 2010, Pieczka 2011).

Introduction

This paper will consider the concept of social capital in relation to public relations and argue that traditional communication practices used for stakeholder management can encourage adversarial behaviour which ultimately undermines social capital. It uses a case study to illustrate that these practices can result in organizational goals being achieved (in this case approval for a new high school to be built on a local park in Portobello, Edinburgh) but cause long term damage to levels of social capital and argues that a stakeholder engagement approach based on dialogic principles of facilitating dissent, could result in more sustainable outcomes. In this respect, the goal should be to achieve ‘mutual understanding’ and this paper attempts to illustrate, in practical terms, what this means.

The paper emerges from the work being done at Queen Margaret University’s Centre for Dialogue and Deliberation. It builds on previously published work there (in particular see Pieczka, 2011). The paper aims to explicate the concept of dialogue in relation to public relations thinking and practice. It is not written from within a paradigm which views ‘excellent’ public relations as ‘symmetrical’ (Grunig 1992, 2001; Grunig et al 2006; Huang in Toth 2007) or as being about building relationships (Ledingham 2003, 2007 Ledingham and

Bruning 2000). It is written from the perspective that considers most public relations activity to be persuasive and about managing stakeholders in order to advocate an organisational position. However, we are interested in particular areas of public relations (such as CSR, employee and community relations and consultation) which focus on *engaging* (as opposed to *managing*) stakeholders. In this area of practice then, this paper aims to more clearly elucidate what constitutes ‘engagement’. The argument made here is that this type of public relations is aimed at building social capital and establishing legitimacy. To achieve this, in order to effectively *engage* with stakeholders we cannot take an organisational centric view of engagement as being a way of trying to build consensus around a predetermined position. We argue that instead of trying to marshall consensus among stakeholders – it might be more appropriate to recognise a diversity of opinion and thus aim to facilitate dissent instead. We also argue that to engage appropriately public relations should adopt a communicative approach which isn’t about ticking boxes to ‘prove’ consultation has happened but is about enabling a range of stakeholders to express their views and be listened to. In this situation then, we argue that public relations should adopt a dialogic approach and -in contrast to some of the public relations literature which talks about dialogue (Pieczka 2011)- move towards clarifying what is meant by this term.

Key Concepts

Social Capital

At an organizational level, social capital can refer to the impact that organizations can have on sustaining cohesive societies (through employment creation, community relations and corporate social responsibility activities and so on)ⁱ, but also in a more commercially strategic sense, it refers to the *value* accrued by an organization being deemed a trustworthy, productive actor in society and part of a network: ‘the type of connections that an organisation has with competitors, politicians, journalists, bureaucrats, researchers and other

relevant groups' (Ihlen 2009). An in-depth analysis of the Portobello High School case study illustrates the operation of social capital as defined in a number of ways. For example Bordieu's (1983) conceptualisation which refers to elites gaining power through access to social networks can be seen in the way both activist groups were able to use professional skills (a sign of their socio-economic status) such as media relations or contacts (by joining their community council or in one case, one case becoming a city councillor) to further their cause. In this paper however we draw mainly on Putnam's conceptualisation of social capital which he defines as“connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam 2000, p. 19). We are focussing on social capital as an indicator of community cohesion and it is useful here to focus on the definition adopted for use across all UK Government Departments by the Office for National Statistics (ONS),

‘Social capital describes the pattern and intensity of the personal connections people form and the shared values which arise from these connections. Greater interaction between people generates a greater sense of community spirit.

Definitions of social capital vary, but the main aspects include citizenship, 'neighbourliness', social networks and civic participation. The definition used by ONS, taken from the Office for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), is "networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups".' (ONS 2011)

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Dialogue and deliberation

Stakeholder engagement in organisational decision making can take multiple forms including responding to consultation through focus groups/ surveys/ roadshow stands/ public meetings;

‘panel’ membership; advocacy campaigns; public petitions; etc. In many of these activities, communication can be “rhetorically generative” (Burkhalter *et al.* 2002:408), that is, preferences are predetermined and closed, and the goal of communication is mainly to persuade. In contrast, we are interested on a subset of participatory practices structured around communication that is “dialogically generative” (Ibid.), that is, communication in which meanings and preferences can be reshaped and co-produced through interpersonal processes of open-ended interaction (Deetz and Simpson 2004:146). In practice, rhetorically generative communication is at the heart of those participatory processes where strong commitments to particular options are clearly predefined. In contrast, in dialogically generative scenarios there may be also prior commitments and preferences, but they are open for reconsideration and may evolve or change as a result of engaging in communication with others. We group the latter processes under the generic labels of dialogue and deliberation.

Dialogue and deliberation are forms of public discourse based on different traditions, theories and practices. Reviewing the literature reveals that the key difference between both is a matter of emphasis. Dialogue is mostly concerned with dynamics of mutual exploration, understanding and relationship building, whereas deliberation is oriented towards making decisions or reaching conclusions after weighting alternatives in the name of the public interest (see Escobar 2009, forthcoming; Forester 2009; Dryzek 2010; Bohman 1996). A number of practice-oriented authors have proposed to sequence participatory processes along a communication continuum, where different forms of conversational engagement may develop complementarily (e.g. Fischer 2009:290; Kim and Kim 2008; Spano 2001; Levine *et al.* 2005). The following figure illustrates the idea in its simplest form.

Figure 1. The D+D process (Escobar, 2009)

DIALOGUE

Inquiry process:

Reciprocal exploration

Creation of shared meaning

Relationship building

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DELIBERATION

Advocacy process:

Weighting alternatives

Making decisions or reaching conclusions

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Burkhalter et al (2002:408) find that, in practice, deliberation often entails “the pervasive advancement of a priori opinions”, and hence it is “rhetorical rather than dialogically generative”. Accordingly, they acknowledge that some deliberative processes may first require a period of dialogue, understood as an open-ended conversation in which participants strive to understand their experiences, languages, and ways of thinking and expressing. This kind of process can tap into “previously unrealized or unacknowledged perspectives within the group” (p. 411), fostering what Isaacs (1999) calls “collective intelligence”. In addition, leaving decision making for a later stage frees participants from the urgency of enacting advocacy dynamics, and thus it promotes a spirit of reciprocal inquiry.

In dialogue, individuals are called to listen, inquire, understand, explain, and find ways of moving forward together. Disagreements and differences are seen as sites for mutual learning, not intellectual pugilism. The art of posing

questions is valued at least as highly as that of expressing one's own opinions.

The narrative forms of self-disclosure and inquiry are more highly prized than that of advocacy. (Pearce 2007:216)

Drawing on their experience as practitioners, Pearce and Pearce (2000:162) summarise their approach as follows:

(a) Dialogue is a form of communication with specific 'rules' that distinguish it from other forms. (b) Among the effects of these rules are communication patterns that enable people to speak so that others can and will listen, and to listen so that others can and will speak. (c) Participating in this form of communication requires a set of abilities, the most important of which is remaining in the tension between holding your own perspective, being profoundly open to others who are unlike you, and enabling others to act similarly. (d) These abilities are learnable, teachable, and contagious ... (f) Skilled facilitators can construct contexts sufficiently conducive to dialogue.

It is at the initial dialogue stage that productive patterns of communication can be stimulated, so that the latter deliberative stage is enabled to proceed without degenerating in blind adversarial debate. Prior engagement in critical but collaborative dynamics provides the ground for a rich process of decision-making based on a deep understanding and respect of the various perspectives at stake. Therefore, dialogue before deliberation can help to construct a safe space for relationship building, so that participants feel safe enough to question their own assumptions and to be open to new understandings or broadened perspectives. However, instances of deliberative processes characterised by dialogic communication are rare. Much of public discourse in UK and USA is often characterised by adversarial forms of communication (Tannen 1998), which end up

simplifying complex issues (into just two sides), eliminating possibilities for creative solutions not prefigured in the positions initially proposed, creating animosities and enemies who sometimes are more concerned with winning the contest with the other than with implementing the best policies, and driving from the public sphere those who do not relish no-holds-barred combat. (Pearce and Pearce 2004:41-42)

The table below offers an illustration¹ of key contrasts between adversarial and dialogic communication. They are presented as ideal types. In reality, these two orientations appear mixed along the communication spectrum, forming what Barge and Little (2002:379) call "conversational hybrids". The left column represents dynamics that typically appear in public relations' campaigns, advocacy coalitions and party politics, media debates, and some policy-making processes. In contrast, the right column contains principles and dynamics that underpin a dialogic orientation to public dialogue and deliberation, including some of the common themes increasingly shared by dialogue and deliberative scholarship.

¹ Based on my reading of Bohm (2004), Freire (1996), Burbules (1993), Isaacs (1999), Yankelovich (1999), Tannen (1998), Littlejohn & Domenici (2001), Anderson et al. (2004), Pearce & Pearce (2004), Cissna & Anderson (2002), Fischer (2000, 2003, 2009); Innes & Booher (2003, 2010); Burkhalter et al. (2002); Gastil (2008); Levine et al. (2005); and Herzig & Chasin (2006).

Table 1. Adversarial vs. Dialogic Communication (source: Escobar 2009)

	ADVERSARIAL	DIALOGIC
P R I N C I P L E S	Dominant communication pattern: ADVOCACY	Dominant communication pattern: INQUIRY
	1. Confrontational forms of communication:	1. Collaborative forms of communication:
	• Talking in representation of a wider –undefined- group	• Talking is grounded on personal experience
	• The priority is to win	• The priority is to work together, share common ground and explore difference; conflict and disagreement are invitations to further exploration and deeper learning
	• The clash of arguments is the best way to approach an issue	• Inquiring into all positions allows emergent new options and learning
	• Emphasis on performance: rhetorically generative	• Emphasis on relationship: dialogically generative
	2. Certainty:	2. Curiosity / Openness:
	• Assuming that there is one right way of framing an issue	• Assuming that there are multiple valid perspectives
		• Revealing assumptions for re-evaluation through mutual inquiry

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Justifyin g/defending assumptions as truth <p>3. Expertise as superior knowledge (Objectivism/ Empiricism)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The role of experts is to enlighten “non-experts” about an issue • Hard data are objective and speak for themselves <p>4. Outcome orientated</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic agendas are taken for granted • Commu nication as message transmission • Emphasi s on gaining agreement around one position 	<p>3. Multiple ways of knowing (Constructivism/ Post-empiricism)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The role of experts is to interact with “non-experts” towards mutual exploration of an issue • Hard data depend on interpretation (values, worldviews) and is just one among various forms of knowing; i.e.: local, experiential. <p>4. Process orientated</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparent agendas: participants disclose their intentions and must be aware of the context, purpose and impact of the process • Communication as co-creation of meaning • Emphasis on gaining understanding of an issue by creating shared meaning and exploring differences
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D Y N A M I C S	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of spaces suitable for gladiatorial performance • Dynamics of persuasion • Defending one's own views against those of others (hesitation and openness are weaknesses) • Focus on proving the other side wrong; automatic response • Listening to make counterarguments: searching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of safe spaces for personal voicing and storytelling • Learning through inquiry and disclosure • Holding one's own position but allowing others the space to hold theirs • Focus on re-examining all positions; suspending certainty and disbelief • Listening to understand: searching for value in other's positions, co-exploring causes, rules and assumptions that underlay different framings of an issue

	<p>for flaws in others' positions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speech contents are usually predetermined and argument lines pre-packaged • Seeking a conclusion or vote that ratifies your position 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speech contents are emergent and contingent: arguments might evolve after different perspectives shed new light • Insights enable new collaborative dynamics and can set the scene for deliberative decision-making
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A key criticism of some approaches to public dialogue is that, by focussing on finding common ground, they may obscure or neglect differences and thus perpetuate the status quo:

...the commonly held assumptions about what dialogue is and how it happens tend to privilege a 'coming together on common ground' perspective that inherently privileges the already dominant set of understandings. From this communicative orientation, those ... others who must set their perspectives, insights, and understandings aside to 'dialogue' on common ground are likely to continue to feel an absence of voice because their issues will always be beyond the scope of the 'dialogue'. (Deetz and Simpson 2004:158)

The radical respect and inclusion proposed in seminal works on dialogue (i.e. Buber 2004; see also Cissna and Anderson 2002) requires resisting dynamics of uncritical assimilation or exclusion of alternative voices by self-righteous majorities. Only communication patterned on inquiry dynamics, rather than advocacy, allow participants to remain in the tension between holding their own views and respecting others', without having to automatically oppose or assimilate them (Pearce and Pearce 2000; Pearce 2002; Pearce and Pearce 2004). It is by remaining in that difficult tension –temporarily suspending automatic judgement and

reflex response- that dialogue processes may broaden the perspectives of the participants and give place to unforeseen creativity. As Deetz and Simpson (2004) argue:

A shift in orientation from an understanding of communication as a vehicle for overcoming difference to a process of exploring and negotiating difference fundamentally alters our understanding of the form and function of dialogue and reclaims its transformative potential.

Methodology

We have undertaken an ethnographic study of communication patterns and communicative practices adopted by stakeholders affected by the relocation of Portobello High School to Portobello Park focussing in particular on members of the Portobello community.

Research methods include participant observation, (one author has been involved in an activist group Portobello For A New School since it's inception in 2006) and content analysis of texts including a thread of an online forum devoted specifically to discussing the High School proposition dating from 2005 to the present day (consisting of almost 5,000 posts and 235,700 views at the time of writing); media coverage and online responses; letters pages; activist websites and social media sites and initial interviews with participants.

Case Study

The following case study catalogues a situation where a decision to relocate a high school – initially aimed to be built by 2010 - has been prolonged and dogged by bitter disputes . Planning permission was finally granted in February 2011 (although a legal challenge to this decision is to be launched by the Portobello Park Action Group) and the school is now planned to open in January 2014. Controversy and protracted debate about the plan has already delayed the project by five years and legal action may cause further delays. The case

has been chosen to illustrate how common communicative practices utilised for engaging with stakeholders can be seen as encouraging adversarial debate which is ultimately damaging to social capital and, arguably, the legitimacy of decisions made and the organisation which has orchestrated them.

Portobello High School is the largest and most decrepit school in Edinburgh. One thousand four hundred pupils are confined in an eight -storey 1960's tower-block without any outdoor sports facilities or enough playground space to accommodate them during breaks. They are bussed off for outdoor sports – an arrangement which facilitates 20 minutes exercise out of a one and a half hour Physical Education class. It breaks many of the current legal requirements including those specifying minimum space per pupil. The need for a new school is universally accepted, but is complicated because, according to the Council, the only site which can realistically accommodate a new building is a local park. Clearly then , this is far from straightforward for any community – and like many other types of organisational decisions, suits the needs and aspirations of some stakeholder groups whilst aggravating others.

The first documentation of public discussion surrounding replacing the high school by building in the Park emerges from a public meeting for the Portobello community to debate the replacement of its library and community centre and the sale of a site used for five-a-side football on 12th October 2005 (Talk Porty 2011) . At this very early point, key stakeholders can be clearly identified as those who speak out about their views, participate in discussing them in the online forum ‘ Talk Porty’ or have their views reported on the online forum. So engaging them in dialogue at this very early stage – to discuss the *problem* of how to replace the High School- was clearly possible. However that does not happen – instead The City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) presents a *solution* - in 2006 it announces its intention to replace Portobello High School on Portobello Park at a meeting of Andrew Holmes - the Director of

City Development, Rev Ewan Aitken - executive member for Children and Families, Roy Jobson - Director of Education, local councillors and the school's Parent Council (all stakeholders who would be pro the decision). Following this meeting, the decision was announced at a press conference and through letters home in the school bags of High School pupils and pupils at the seven feeder primary schools. The Council stressed that this was not a 'done deal' and was the beginning of a consultation but expected that a new school (along with housing to be sold to pay for the new building) would be open for business by 2009/10.

'The Council's outline plan is ambitious and wide-ranging, and will attract strong views from several standpoints. It offers Portobello and the east of the city the prospect of a first class school in its own grounds. The Board has considered the plan in outline, and recognises the outstanding educational merits as well as potential community, environmental and housing implications of such a development. It will listen carefully to a range of views on the plan, and seek to represent those of parents and the school community.

Portobello High School's claim is urgent, important and on a substantial scale. There is no shortage of evidence to back the School's case for replacement and, also, evidence that inaction will see further basic systems of the building's fabric fail. The School Board calls on you to accept the strong educational case for action, for urgent replacement of the school. Otherwise, inevitable deterioration of the current facility will force a hasty and unsatisfactory set of decisions on the Council, school, staff, pupils and parents. We ask that all local public representatives unite in supporting the school. '(Fraser 2006)

The announcement split the community – with groups adopting entrenched positions very quickly. In particular two activist groups emerged – Portobello For A New School (PFANS) and Portobello Park Action Group (PPAG) to advocate on behalf of different interests.

PPAG framed the issue as being about protecting the environment – a David and Goliath battle against the Council to protect land which it deemed to be precious to the community.

PFANS initially framed the issue as being about environmental justice – and the rights of many to access green space. When this proved too complex an argument for the media they shifted to a frame of a children's battle for a decent education and ability to exercise (linked to existing stories of increasing childhood obesity and other themes over the 5 year battle).

Communicative practices

Members of PPAG and PFANS communicated with members of the wider community via a 'NEW PHS' thread on a Portobello community online forum – with increasing vitriol until certain posts had to be removed and PPAG largely refused to interact in that forum (Talk Porty 2011). In addition, both groups launched websites and used social media as well as traditional media – (through media relations, contributions to letters pages and online discussion relating to news stories) and launched highly organised campaigns to advocate their position.

The CEC used a number of communication techniques – in particular meetings with specific stakeholder groups (golfers, park residents, primary school parents, high school parents), road shows, questionnaires and large 'town hall' meetings facilitated by officials including a retired chief of police. These meetings have been particularly acrimonious over the years – with golfers and park residents deluging meetings aimed at parents and chanting and drumming feet during CEC presentations. And members of PFANS very much dominating online forum discussions to the extent that PPAG members withdrew from that domain.

Space precludes an in-depth analysis (the subject of another paper) of the communication outputs of each group but the characteristics are epitomised in the following quote from one of the members of an activist group,

‘ We were really organised – identified our key messages and worked out who would ask what questions at meetings. We’d go along and steel ourselves to make our points. It was gruelling. And we analysed every word of the opposition to point out where they were being inconsistent or untruthful. You couldn’t afford to be sympathetic, we needed to make sure that there were always as many positive as negative comments’.

These characteristics are further illustrated in the ‘adversarial column ‘ of table 1 above to illustrate some key contrasts between the discursive practices of adversarial and dialogic communication.:

The left column represents dynamics that we argue typically appear in public relations’ campaigns, advocacy coalitions and party politics, media debates, and traditional policy making processes. In contrast, the right column focuses on principles and practices that underpin a dialogic orientation to public dialogue and deliberation, and it illustrates some of the common themes shared by dialogue and deliberative scholarship.

We propose that the type of communication adopted in the PHS case although it attempted to engage stakeholders (and the Council clearly stated it would listen and act on the wishes of the community) forced the community into adopting adversarial communication practices and damaged social capital within the community of Portobello. This is evidenced in particular in the analysis of the Online Forum(Talk Porty 2011), Evening News letters pages (Talk Porty Archive 2011) and comments following online discussion of media coverage (Talk Porty Archive 2011) and as part of the participant observation and initial interviews .

The following quote from someone who wasn't a member of either group (but does want a new school on the park) illustrates one of the ways in which social capital has been damaged

“ I used to get involved in organising The Village Show and would like to get involved with POD [Portobello Open Door – arts organisation] and PEDAL [Portobello environmental organisation] but can't face it because I know that members of PPAG are involved there’.

In 2006 the Council knew that this would be a controversial situation and could easily identify key stakeholder groups. We argue that had a dialogic approach been taken from the beginning, the same outcome could have been achieved (planning permission granted for a school in the park) but with less damage to social capital (and consequently perhaps a less protracted and acrimonious process). The key ingredients would be to have engaged stakeholders much earlier (to explore the *problem* not react to a *solution*) with those with opposing views discussing their views *together* facilitated as dialogue groups - research suggests that focus groups where individual groups of stakeholders discuss controversial issues without members of oppositional groups present can result in participants adopting more entrenched and radical views as a result of the process (Zorn et al 2006). The aim of this would be to ensure that key stakeholders could speak and listen and understand each others' perspectives. Deliberative techniques could then have been adopted had CEC wanted to move to engaging stakeholders in the planning process.

Talking social capital into existence: community-making through dialogue and deliberation

In retrospect, the process presented in our case study seemed a good opportunity to open spaces for dialogic communication across the community. Spaces in which citizens, experts and authorities could form a “community of inquiry” (Fischer 2003:205-37; Shields 2003),

that is, a collaborative process where issues are deliberated in depth, and where the role of experts is to assist non-experts in the exploration of policy alternatives.

Whereas the goal in the technical community is to find the one best solution to a problem, the facilitation of a public deliberative forum has a broader function. The process in the latter is not only to arrive at a workable decision, but also to find the workable decision that holds the decision-making participants together. In this regard, the effective political decision is the one that preserves or even improves the capacity to make future decisions. (Fischer 2009:160)

Fischer reminds us here that engagement processes need to achieve workable solutions without neglecting the impact of the process in terms of social capital. In other words, it matters not only developing the best policy option, but also that the process leaves behind a resilient community with improved resources for future collective problem-solving (rather than a polarised community). Both adversarial and dialogic processes can leave a legacy of communication patterns ready to be reignited by future community issues.

Despite official research arguing that deliberative dialogues had proven more effective and less confrontational in the context of planning processes in Scotland (Nicholson 2005:33-4; Jenkins *et al.* 2002), written consultation and traditional public hearings have remained the most common methods of participation. These traditional formats are ideal stages for adversarial communication. Rather than engaging in dialogue and deliberation, participants are encouraged to put their best efforts into performing monologues. Often these processes end up producing decisions that are difficult to implement, and divide communities in groups of winners and losers. In the long term, as Fischer (2009:294) argues:

Little is gained ... by formally winning an argument if all of the parties are not comfortable with the outcome. An outcome that leaves bad feelings carries forward problems –perhaps only latent at first- that easily give rise to an active opposition to the initial result. In policy politics, this typically occurs in the process of implementing the decision.

Planning processes can offer a crucial opportunity to empower communities through democratic practice that entails not only decision-making but also civic learning and discovery (e.g. Fischer 2000:221-41, 2003:206-10). The kind of interaction modelled in such processes contributes to galvanise a particular imaginary of the community, not only for participants but also for bystanders. In many ways, while participating, the community holds a mirror to itself. The way these processes are experienced generates long-lasting narratives and metaphors² that contribute to shape the way citizens relate to each other. It contributes to define ongoing boundaries of interaction, patterns of communication and tacit rules of engagement. In other words, it has a direct impact on the resilience, trust, creativity, and problem-solving capacity of a community -all key ingredients of social capital.

² On metaphors see Lakoff and Johnson (2003).

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